

Backyard Cottages

Frequently Asked Questions

July 2009

1) What is a backyard cottage?

As one homeowner describes it, a backyard cottage is a “mother-in-law unit with a little more breathing room.” In other words, a backyard cottage is a small dwelling unit on the same lot as, but separate from, a single-family house. The owner must live in either the primary home or the backyard cottage.

2) Currently, who can build a backyard cottage?

Only single-family homeowners in southeast Seattle are allowed to build backyard cottages, provided their lot is:

- their primary residence;
- 4000 square feet or greater;
- located outside of the Shoreline District; and,
- at least 25 feet wide and 70 feet deep.



3) Where else can you find backyard cottages?

Many other cities and jurisdictions in Washington State and the Pacific Northwest allow backyard cottages, including Clyde Hill, Issaquah, Kirkland, Mercer Island, Shoreline, Newcastle, Redmond, Burien, SeaTac, parts of unincorporated King County, Woodinville, Yarrow Point, and Portland, OR.

4) What do residents in southeast Seattle think about backyard cottages?

In a survey of 118 neighbors living near a permitted backyard cottage in southeast Seattle, 96 respondents felt that the owners of single-family homes should be allowed to build a backyard cottage on their property. Because many backyard cottages are not visible from the street, more than half the residents living nearby weren't aware that one had been built. Most neighbors who knew about the backyard cottage felt it either had a positive impact or no impact on their neighborhood. Among those aware of a backyard cottage in their neighborhood:

- 71% said that the backyard cottage in their neighborhood fit in with the surrounding homes.
- 84% noticed no impacts on parking or traffic directly related to the cottage.
- 83% were supportive or strongly supportive of allowing backyard cottages.

5) Why do people like backyard cottages?

Homeowners have many different reasons. For seniors, a backyard cottage offers a way to downsize while living next to their families and staying in the same neighborhood. Others want flexibility for their extended families or friends, a place for their children, or an opportunity to invest in their property while providing affordable housing for singles and young couples.

6) How much of a lot can a backyard cottage use?

Backyard cottages are limited to 800 square feet of interior area, including any garage or storage area. They must also fit within the current lot coverage allowance, which requires that all structures generally cover no more than 35% of the lot. In addition, all accessory structures may only cover 40% of the required rear yard.

7) Does this increase the allowable density of single-family neighborhoods?

No, there is no change in the number of dwelling units allowed on a lot in a single-family zone. Since 1994, all single-family zoned lots are allowed an accessory dwelling unit, as long as it is attached to the main house. In southeast Seattle, homeowners have the additional flexibility to have either an attached accessory dwelling unit (ADU) or backyard cottage, but not both. Backyard cottages do not change the allowed density, or the number of unrelated people allowed to live on a single-family zoned lot.



8) Do backyard cottages increase traffic/parking congestion?

At the neighborhood level, backyard cottages are not anticipated to produce more cars on the street. Attached ADUs are already allowed in homes in single-family zones and are required to have one off-street parking space. One additional off-street parking space per dwelling unit would continue to be required for any new accessory dwelling unit, whether detached or in the main house.

9) Are homeowners required to live in the backyard cottages?

Owners must occupy the home or the backyard cottage as their permanent and principal residence. Homeowners are already allowed to rent out a portion of their home, whether a room or an attached accessory dwelling unit.

10) Can the backyard cottage be sold separately from the main house?

No, owners are not allowed to subdivide their land and sell the backyard cottage separately.

11) Can I have both a backyard cottage and an attached accessory unit in the main house?

No. Lots in single-family zones would be permitted no more than one ADU, either attached or detached.

12) How will my privacy be protected?

Backyard cottage owners and their neighbors have a shared interest in protecting privacy. In southeast Seattle, backyard cottage owners were sensitive to the concerns of their neighbors and designed their structures to minimize impacts on privacy.

In addition, development standards have been crafted to minimize privacy impacts. Backyard cottages are not allowed in required front yards, where they could detract from the character of single-family neighborhoods. Where backyard cottages do face a street from a side or rear lot area, only one entrance may be located on each street-facing façade. Entrances may not be located on façades facing the nearest side lot line, or the rear lot line, unless either lot line abuts an alley or other public right-of-way.

The allowable height of a backyard cottage is lower for narrower lots and increases with the width of the lot; depending on the width of the lot, the height of a backyard cottage can range from 15-23 feet. This helps make backyard cottages proportionate to the lots they are built on. In all cases backyard cottages would be shorter than the 35-foot height allowed for single-family houses.

13) Are people required to design cottages that fit the character of a neighborhood?

As with a single-family home, there are no specific architectural styles required for backyard cottages. However, development standards have been crafted to help ensure a proper fit for a backyard cottage within a neighborhood. In addition to these standards the Seattle Planning Commission has prepared a Design Guide to help promote design that fits in with existing neighborhoods.